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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 LAGOS 000482

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SUBJECT: CHANGING CHARACTER OF KIDNAPPING IN NIGERIA

REF: 08 LAGOS 434

Classified By: Consul General Donna M. Blair for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) Kidnapping in Nigeria is increasing in frequency, expanding in scope and changing in character. This seriously under-reported crime may be occurring as frequently as 40 times a week, and targets are increasingly ordinary Nigerians. Incidents are no longer geographically concentrated in the Niger Delta but have been reported in 16 of Nigeria's 36 states in the last two months, including four states in the North. The character of the kidnapping is predominately criminal not political, and is sometimes highly organized but largely risk free. Kidnapping fraud is a lucrative off-shoot of the kidnapping industry. Kidnapping will continue to plague the country until the police learn how to respond more effectively and victim's families and associates no longer pay ransoms. END SUMMARY.

KIDNAPPING INCREASING IN FREQUENCY

¶12. (C) In the period between September 15 and November 30, 42 reported incidents of kidnapping occurred in Nigeria, including seven incidents involving multiple hostages, according to records kept by an RSO contact. On November 9, a total of nine separate kidnapping incidents were recorded. Press reports citing the Nigerian police claim that by early November more than 500 people had been held for ransom to date this year, a substantial increase over the 353 incidents registered in 2008. Some observers speculate that kidnapping is becoming more common because the use of credit cards and electric payments among the rich make armed robberies less lucrative; others believe it is the latest "fad" in crime, reflecting better police response to some armed robberies.

UNDER-REPORTED CRIME

¶13. (C) Abduction for ransom is, however, a seriously under-reported crime. The families of victims often negotiate and pay ransoms directly to the kidnappers because they lack confidence in the police. The result is an unquantifiable number of kidnappings neither recorded in police statistics nor reported in the press, and an

increasing sense of insecurity across the country. Radio Vision Africa, a private radio network located in Abia state, recorded over 500 calls in just one month from listeners decrying the pervasive threat of kidnapping. A contact told PolOff that at least one kidnapping occurred every week in the state of Akwa Ibom. Gabriel Osemwiegie from a private security firm in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, estimated that a kidnapping occurred in that city alone every week. RSO contacts estimate that altogether as many as 40 kidnappings occur in Nigeria every week. If true, this would put the number of people kidnapped annually at over 2,000. (NOTE: Mexico has the highest number of kidnappings annually, with an estimated 7,000 in 2008, according to the December 4 New York Times Magazine. END NOTE.)

KIDNAPPNG CRIMINAL NOT POLITICAL IN NATURE

¶4. (C) Most kidnappings involve criminal acts rather than political ones. In no recent case have kidnappers made political demands, although political motives can be assumed in connection with the kidnapping of the father of the Peoples' Democratic Party gubernatorial candidate in Anambra State.

¶5. (C) The targets of kidnapping are only occasionally foreigners or prominent politicians. Increasingly the victims are ordinary Nigerians. Victims in recent months included a nurse from a federal hospital (Imo, October 14), an actor (Rivers, November 9), a lawyer (Edo, November 9), and several

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businessmen (Zaria, September 24, Enugu, September 25, Anambra, October 15 and Delta, November 22). Victims included children in ten of the 42 incidents recorded between September 14 and November 30, with children often seized on their way to or from school. Children as young as five have been taken hostage. Elderly parents, wives and even the servants of the middle-class have increasingly become the targets of kidnappings as well.

¶6. (C) The criminal nature of kidnapping is ironically underlined by militant leader "Tom Polo" (Chief Government Ekpemupolo) claiming that he paid over 220 million naira (roughly USD 1.5 million) to secure the release of women, children and foreigners captured by rogue groups not associated with his own organization or the "Niger Delta struggle." (NOTE: MEND spokesman Jomo Gbomo claimed that MEND had "saved" kidnapping victims from "criminals" or negotiated their release on humanitarian grounds on a number of occasions in the second half of 2008. END NOTE.)

ORGANIZED CRIME, COMMUNAL CRIME

¶7. (C) RSO contacts claim that in a number of incidents kidnappers have demonstrated sophisticated organization. In addition to good intelligence, often based on insider knowledge of a victim's pattern of movement and habits, victims are often moved long distances and kept at central "holding places." A police raid in Edo state on December 3 that resulted in the release of five hostages taken in three unrelated incidents and total of 14 kidnappers arrested is a case in point.

¶8. (C) Another disturbing trend is the involvement of entire communities. Governor Oshiomhole of Edo State told PolOff on December 7 that Edo's anti-kidnapping task force composed of both police and military had identified 2-3 communities in which "everyone including old women and children" were involved in and profiting from the kidnapping business. This corroborates the President of the Nigerian Trawler Owners' Association's story that after a shrimp trawler was forced aground near a fishing village last year the entire village,

including market women, robbed and abused the crew. (Reftel A)

LOW-RISKS

¶9. (C) Kidnapping in Nigeria is comparatively low risk because victims and their families do not report most cases to the police. Even in cases that are reported, police do not pursue kidnappers after a hostage has been released, according to attorney Simon Amaduobogha. Amaduobogha added that it is considerably less dangerous to "nab a school-girl on her way home" than to carry out an armed robbery or break into someone's house, but the rewards were potentially greater because entire families will pool their resources for the release of a relative. One explanation of the police's apparent inaction was suggested in a New York Times Magazine article on December 4 which quoted the lawyer of a kidnapper claiming the police was informed of kidnappings in advance and received a cut of the ransom money. While this cannot be ruled out, Post believes that insufficient resources are the principal reason why the Nigerian police do not pursue kidnappers after the release of hostages. The recent introduction of capital punishment for kidnapping in a number of states will have little deterrent effect as long as there are only slight chances of arrest.

RANSOM DEMANDS FALLING

¶10. (C) Ransom demands have fallen as the victims become less prominent and less prosperous. Ransom demands ran in the millions of dollars when foreign oil workers were the preferred target. Total ransoms paid in Nigeria between 2006 and 2008 exceeded USD 100 million, according to the inspector general of the Nigeria Police Force Mike Okiro as quoted in the press. When targeting ordinary Nigerians, the ransoms are much more modest. The employee of a Nigerian NGO told

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PolOff that kidnappers seized his sister in September and held her for two days while the family negotiated the ransom down from the initial demand of 25 million naira (USD 165,000) to 1 million naira (USD 6,650). Another contact told PolOff that in Rivers State kidnappers charged 25,000 naira (USD 167) for the release of school children, the equivalent of a month's salary for a domestic worker in Lagos. The RSO in Lagos has heard of ransom demands of as little as 5,000 naira (USD 33). Although these sums seem small, in a country where 70 percent of the population earns less than USD two dollars daily, these ransoms often represent a significant financial burden on relatives.

KIDNAPPING NO LONGER CONCENTRATED IN THE NIGER DELTA

¶11. (C) Kidnapping is no longer concentrated in the Niger Delta. Almost half of Nigeria's states have become venues for kidnapping. The highest number of kidnapping incidents in the period September 15 to November 30 was recorded in Rivers State (nine), but Edo State had the second highest number of incidents (seven). Four incidents were reported in the same period in each Abia, Anambra, and Delta states, three each in Ebony and Enugu States, two in Kaduna and Benue, and a single incident was reported in Cross River, Niger and Ogun states. Press reports on kidnapping from this period alleged incidents in Lagos, Oyo, Ondo and Imo States as well.

¶12. (C) Notably, abductions for ransom were reported in three states in the North of Nigeria (Niger, Kaduna and Benue), while the core Niger Delta State of Bayelsa did not figure in the statistics of recorded incidents for the time period examined. However, Akwa Ibom was also absent from the

statistics, although incidents allegedly occur there regularly. (COMMENT: The absence of both these states from the data available reflects under-reporting rather than freedom from this kind of crime. END COMMENT.)

KIDNAPPING FUELS SECONDARY INDUSTRIES

¶13. (C) Mediating between kidnappers and the families of victims has developed into an independent business, crime specialist Dumo Otujaye is quoted saying in the Nigerian press. Mediators charge a "transaction fee" and allegedly have taken, in some cases, the largest share of the payment by greatly exaggerating kidnappers' demands. The business of mediation is booming as the number of kidnappings increase and people remain reluctant to involve the police.

¶14. (C) Nigerian fraudsters also capitalize on Nigeria's growing reputation as one of the kidnapping capitals of the world. The most common tactic is to establish a false internet identity and develop a virtual relationship with a foreigner before sending or having an accomplice send frantic messages to the foreigner alleging that the fraudster has been kidnapped and a ransom must be paid into the bank account provided.

COMMENT

¶15. (C) Kidnapping is no longer a "Niger Delta" problem. Moreover, the GON amnesty has not had any significant impact on its frequency within the Delta. Police inadequacies help make kidnapping a low-risk crime and encourages people to negotiate and pay ransoms rather than involve the authorities.

¶16. (U) ConGen Lagos has coordinated this telegram with Embassy Abuja.
BLAIR